

« MAR 2015

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Sleepless in...Venice: 24 hrs in the city of masks

Determined to see the world on a budget Danny Smith uses his insomnia to his advantage and explores the cities of the world without sleep. This week - Venice during Carnival



By
Danny Smith



I'm definitely going to pass out - it's not the most helpful thought to have as you're barrelling through the crowds and vaulting the drag along suitcases of Stansted airport at 6 in the morning. I developed this stress headache half an hour ago on the coach when I checked my booking and realised that the coach was due to pull up five minutes after my gate was due to close.

There are 59 departure gates at Stansted Airport, my gate number is 59 and as far away from the main terminus building you can be without actually being at your destination. The headache at this point is pulsing a staccato rhythm of pain in my head thats making it both difficult to run and see out my right eye properly.

I'm going to pass out and I haven't even got to the hard part yet.

The plan, such as it is, is to spend 24 hours awake in a city so weird and non-linear it seems like a dream anyway. That city is Venice. To make things more interesting I'm arriving on the last day and night of the the carnival. The modern carnival is as old as I am, both of us born in the first couple of months of 1979, but the tradition dates back to the Renaissance and was stopped in 1798 when Napoleon saw how debauched it was. Mainly linked to the start of Lent, but in England where we traditionally get rid of all the good things in our pantry by making pancakes, other Catholic countries get rid of all their baser urges by putting on masks and drinking for a few weeks.

Nowadays the carnival in Venice is big business, pulling tourists from all over the world during what would normally be a cold and misty downtime. If I were to be sleeping during this trip, I probably couldn't afford it, room prices rocket during the festival and sell out fast.

24 hrs starts at 9.10am - As I deplane I pause in the doorway and put on my shades. Something about going down the stairs onto the runway always makes me feel a little bit like a rock star, even if I had just spent the last hour or so hearing the couple next to me talk about their respective digestive problems. I get the bus to Venice, it costs €20 for a return with ten days and they leave every ten minutes or so.

9.45am - walking into Venice itself I can see colourful bits of paper confetti in the cracks of the clean stone streets. In the square in front of the train station,

although there are a few people, it'd be a bit much to describe them as 'crowds'. Already there are some people in costume, three younger girls are wearing vintage wedding dresses and there are crowds forming around the couple of face painters.

10.30am - Venice is made up of tourists, a mixture of Japanese and American mainly. And although the Venetians swan elegantly through the crowds with a gait of pure assurance, the delivery men with hand wagons piled high with boxes shout 'attenzione' before plowing forward anyway. Elder gentleman wearing trilbies and capes and ladies with casual fur coats dot the crowd seemingly unaware of the dawdling invaders to their floating city.

I stop for a late breakfast at [Osteria Dal Ricco Peaco](#), a local bar selling wine for a couple of euro's a glass. In Venice people tend not to sit for drinks and snacks and despite its relative earliness the bar is already full of people leaning on high tables. I overhear a very patient waitress explain to an American couple that the menu wasn't ready yet so I finish my wine and duck next door to a kebab shop that was advertising pizza with french fries as a topping. I opt for a kebab which was both surprisingly fresh and edible.

11.24am - Venice is a city that is hard to get a handle on. Most cities have a rhythm, a grammar, that after a while you can pick up on. But in Venice when you turn a corner you never really know what you're going to get, a narrow alley, a piazzato with a beautiful but crumbling marble church, a dead end, a

canal. There are no roads, only stone paths that are often cobbled and many steps over canals that lace the city like blood vessels. The tall buildings are painted pastel colours with Rococo flourishes and neoclassical columns blending with the more functional modern touches. These high buildings combined with the narrow passages divorces you from any landmarks and its easy to lose all sense of direction. You know if you've stumbled into a residential area because washing hangs on lines strung between the buildings.

But getting lost isn't so bad, the joy of exploring this most singular place is more than enough to make up for any discomfort. And I am lost. Very much so. I come across a small piazza and see a sign for "Campo Del A Morte". I don't speak Italian but have enough latin for this to send a shiver of disquiet down my back.

12.09 - I take a chance going down a small alley and find myself on the Riva degli Schiavoni a waterfront path leading from St Marks Square past the Doge's Palace, overlooking the milky green waters of the entrance to the Grand Canal. The sun is high in the sky and despite a chill to the breeze coming off the water it feels briefly like a premonition of summer. The street is littered with stalls selling the standard myriad of masks and knick knacks, occasionally elaborately costumed stilt walkers take their pictures with passing tourists and street hawkers selling photography wands repeat 'selfie?' to anyone who gets near. I stop by the water and the throbbing of my feet remind me that I've been walking for three straight hours.

The Piazza San Marco is full, the people dressed up look resplendent, dressed in elaborate costumes that commonly are a historical collage of Louie the IVXX and the Renaissance era aristocracy. Powder blue lace and ruffles, Baroque filigree and sequins. Almost all are still in practiced poses while the ones that are moving drift at a glacial pace. All have full face masks. They have a strange effect on the crowds, like magnets they attract them, but also repel them, an aura of space in a crowded square surrounded by people taking photographs.

12.24pm - I make my way to the stage and seating area, although sectioned off from the main piazza the seating is free and even has a waitress service if you can catch one of the people working there as they buzz around. Like much of the festival it seems to be working on a 'freemium' model, most things are free but if you want to pay a bit extra you can upgrade. In this case there are box tables overlooking the stage. As I arrive there is a gymnastic performance that starts in a giant bubble, continues of a set of high swings and finishes with a pole performance.

12.48pm - as I walk out of the square a group of teenagers surround me. 'selfie!' 'selfie' they shout. I put my hand over my wallet - a reflex from travelling in [India last year](#) - and the girl next to me extends a selfie stick out in front and snaps herself next to a bewildered me surrounded by her friends. I am not in a costume but I do have blue green hair which at certain angles is the same colour as the lagoon. Determined to find a piazza listed on the website I made a note of yesterday I set off following a map I bought for €2 at the airport.

1.10pm - Lost again, try to find my way back. I watch a street performer for a while, a eastern European gentleman flow through a series slick magic tricks producing and disappearing colourful hankies soft and faded with handling.

2.15pm - I find myself back at the Riva degli Schiavoni and jump on the water bus, its quite expensive for a single journey but worth it. The bus I take follows the Grand Canal around and takes me back to the train station. It's full but thats okay, I stay on deck and am able to take in the city from while gently pulling along its waterways. Venice actually makes a lot more sense from the water. It's evident that people are not really supposed to be walking across the it. My perception shifts from seeing Venice as a city interrupted by canals, to what it actually is, a lagoon with some impossible buildings shorn up on its islands.

2.45pm - Carnival gets up to three million visitors which isn't bad for a city that has a population of less than 30 thousand, but it does mean the infrastructure can be a bit lacking at times. There are public toilets but most of them cost a €1 - €2 and are difficult to find. I go to the train station and opt to use the public bathroom and pay the toll rather than nip around the back and piss in the alley like most of the residents had.

3.21pm - Wandering down to the university, there is a small park, its odd to see a green space in the city, nearby at the entrance some students have gathered and a drinking glasses of red wine and are singing along to a roughly played guitar.

3.47pm - I find an [Irish pub](#) near the main drag, or at least I think it's Irish. They seem to be advertising the rugby and have Harp and Guinness so I presume that what they're going for. Hanging over the bar is a huge net filled with wine corks and the back half of the room is papered with notes of currencies from all over the world. The atmosphere was laid back and welcoming and in a city renowned for its beauty, holding myself up in the back of a bar felt positively decadent.

5.00pm - Piazza San Marco is across the city, as I leave the bar I look up to the pinks and reds of a winter sunset on a clear day. On the way I nip into a shop and buy a couple of bottles of beer. Now I hadn't seen any signs against drinking in the streets, but I don't speak Italian, so I wait to see if anyone else is. I needn't have worried. A little later a crowd of younger guys are stopped by the police. The cop points to the bottle one of them is holding. I pause. Then, smiling, he offers a bottle opener from his pocket.

By now the crowds had thickened a bit, with many in fancy dress, not only the elaborate masked gentry but most forms of fancy dress ranging from the silly glasses and a hat, to elaborate cosplay - at least five people dressed as Ezio from the *Assassin's Creed* games. Pirates were popular, superheroes too. which meant every so often I would catch a catch sight of a pop culture icon as they glimpse around a corner. A flash of Spider-Man, a snatch of Wonder Woman. In my memory a myriad of crowds, crumbling walls, and pop culture.

I drink my beers watching the sky change colours in a Piazza lost in the centre of

Venice.

5.44pm - When I get to the square it's busier than earlier, the crowd is older and wrapped up well for the cold evening breeze. The temperature is dropping fast without the sun. I find a seat near the front of the stage area, the act is three older guys singing opera songs. The crowd flare into applause, I didn't recognise the song and I've got a couple of seconds to think 'wouldn't it be funny if they sing the Just One Cornetto song' before all three of them launch into the Just One Cornetto song. Next is *Nessun Dorma*, when it starts a man in a cream tail coat spins around and throws his arms out. I glance up to find a near perfect Pavarotti look-a-like climbing onto the plastic tables next to me miming the song and waving his hat about, much to the confusion of the guys on stage 50 yards away who can only see the crowd watching the back of a fat guy on a table who's getting more attention than they are. They finish with *Nel blu dipinto di blu* more commonly known from the Dean Martin cover '*Volare*', despite knowing it was originally a Eurovision Song Contest entry I can only sing the Woo-Ohh-Oh-Oh bits. Which shows that I sadly more skilled in crap pop trivia than European languages.

7.00pm - While the faux Pavarotti is still being mobbed by the crowds the bells of El Paron De Casa start to peel and bits of paper, catching the eddies and updrafts, dance down onto Piazza San Marco.

7.05pm - It seems the freemium model is continued into the public facilities, the

public toilets just off the square has two floors the bottom floor has five toilets for free, the upstairs are nicer and cost €1.50. Having spent nearly €10 in pennies already I wait downstairs. When somebody asks me if I was next the girl next to me hears my accent.

“Excuse me are you Australian?” she asks, she has an Australian accent herself.

“Not at all I’m from the UK, but I do get that a lot” she seems excited.

“You sound exactly like you’re from Cairns, like me, your accent is the same” she shouts to her boyfriend “TC come and listen to this guy talk” a large Aussie guy comes over

“Hello TC” I hear myself say, but my subconscious has done something terrible, so not to prove this lady wrong my brain has tried to play up the Aussieness to my accent. What actually comes out of my mouth is a racist impression of an Australian accent. They both look at me like I had punched a koala bear.

“Errrm thinking about it I’m going to go upstairs” they’re still looking at me as I bumble up the stairs.

7.30pm - While I’m not actually lost per se, I certainly don’t know where I am. I’ve come to the area where the the programme lists the other events taking place but there doesn’t seem to be anything here, except other people looking perplexed. One group of people walk through looking particularly confident and everyone follows them. I discover that the huge solid wall I had been waiting

near is part of the Venetian Arsenal - a complex of shipbuilding yards and workshops that is sometimes used for an exhibition space, home of Venice's naval might throughout history, and the origin of the word 'Arsenal'. As much as the winding streets of Venice will allow we follow the 50ft high walls around and are led on to a metal walkway that extends over the water following the wall, and then, thankful back onto land.

7.45pm - I can hear fireworks and loud music, by the time I get to the dockland area they are just finishing. The announcement the second showing the the presentation would be in an hour. In the mean time there are some food stall where I grab a sandwich made with thick slices of pepperoni and a sweet fried fritter from the stall and watch the circus entertainment.

9.30pm - The fireworks are part of larger presentation that started with a projection of an animated short that I think had something to do with fish. The firework crescendo was in time with what certainly sounded like the score from the Johnny Depp pirate movies and accompanied by neatly timed searchlights.

10.00pm - The crowd is ushered into one of the cavernous rooms on the dock, its dark and low red lights mark out silhouettes hanging from swings high in the ceiling, the occasional camera flash a few more figures in the rafters above. Music starts and a live oboist plays jazz refrains as dancers suspended by bungee cords ignore gravity and dance on the walls and undulate overhead.

10.30pm - The lights fall again and a spotlight hits the lead singer of that had set

up on the stage to the crowds left. He introduces himself as Slick Steve and his band as [The Gangsters](#) and launches into a frenetic cover of *King of The Swingers* that demonstrates the vocal power and showmanship we would see for the rest of the gig. Slick Steve is incredibly charming and integrated into the high tempo and over the top rock and roll rhythms are a series of magic tricks and flourishes. All the crowd dance, It's a truly mixed crowd. Older, younger, teenagers, everybody is swinging.

12.00 - After the third encore the band leave and we are reminded that next door is the 'disco'. That finishes at half three, so I figure as long as its not too expensive, it'll be a good place to hang out. By now my back is sore from exertion and my feet ache. The 'disco' is actually a full on dance gig, with two huge rooms, a chill out area and easily four hundred people. But it's only €10 in and comes with a free drink.

3.00am - I've had all I can take. The huge rooms mean I was only marginally warmer than outside. I enjoy dance music and even joined the crowd dancing, but only for so long. I've actually been awake now 24 hrs with only a little sleep before that and spent most of the day walking. I escape into the night before the crowd and head towards the bus station.

4.00am - Lost again, this time properly lost, walking around in circles lost. Venice at night is empty, it bears none of the malice of most European cities at night because I think it's intimate, the walls are close and the streets are short.

It's more uncanny than scary. I walk and explore hoping for landmarks. I realise that all sense of direction or understanding of the this weird dark maze is not only being contradicted by my walk back but actively being undone like Theseus winding his thread back up behind him as he leaves the labyrinth. Unwalking the city back into confusion and discovery.

4.50am - Occasionally I come across a piazza which, judging from the debris and the state of those present, had been the scene of other public get togethers. With only the hardcore left behind to mill around and wait for the sun to come up. I ask a passing group of young guys to show me on the map where I am

"Where do you need to go?" the only english speaker of the group, Lino, asks. I tell him the bus station and he smiles.

"We are going near there you can walk with us" he asks to see my map and shows the rest of the group. they laugh, one speaks rapid Italian.

"Maps are shit" he translates, not aggressively. "They are not accurate and the names are always wrong"

"I thought as much" his friend looks at me, shrugs and says something before walking off smiling. Lino agrees.

"You're either from here or you're lost".

5.30am - I say goodbye to Lino and his friends and enjoy a hot coffee from the

stand by the bus station still doing a brisk trade. I was told before this that everything in Venice closes at eleven. My gamble that this was different paid-off with plenty of people still around even at this early hour.

6.10am - The bus to the airport arrives

7.00am - At the airport - I feel warm for the first time in twelve or so hours

9.20am - Flight home, from my seat I can see the blue green waters of Venice and finally drift off to sleep.

photo - Danny Smith



About the writer

"My wings are like a shield of bourbon. Writer, drunk, lover, not always in that order."
Danny's work has appeared in Vice, Fused and Area magazines. He typically writes about culture, pop and otherwise, and his own experiences travelling through subcultures. He's worked behind the bar and on the doors of the roughest pubs in Birmingham, sold encyclopaedias in the Australian outback, and taught gang kids from the ghettos of New Jersey how to shoot a bow and arrow. He most recently worked as a teaching assistant in a pupil referral unit, but gave it up to explore India and spend more time writing.

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