

If you have an interest in contemporary art, now is the time to visit Venice

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Every two years, the art world descends on Venice in a flurry of who's who, cocktail parties, and great outfits, says **Michelle Darmody**.



It is an intriguing time to visit if you have an interest in contemporary art.

To attempt to explain the Venice Biennale in simple terms is no easy feat. It consists of three sections. Firstly, a large curated show which takes place in massive marine warehouses called the Arsenale.

Every two years, a curator is invited to select artists from around the world, usually under the confines of a theme of their choosing.

Secondly, there are national pavilions in the Giardini, where selected artists – or a group of artists – represent their countries. A ticket (€25) to the Biennale gains you entry into both of these places.

It can take a day to soak up the work in either place, or more if you have the time.

Coinciding with these are a large number of collateral events throughout Venice, while some countries have their pavilions off-site.

The Irish Pavilion, after being off-site for many years, is now imbedded in the main building of the Arsenale. Jessie Jones represented Ireland this year with a slickly installed film installation featuring Olwen Fouéré, with sound by Susan Stenger.

With 'Tremble Tremble', the artist has reimagined a matriarchal society governed by a new set of laws, a different legal order, one in which the multitude are brought together in a symbolic, gigantic body.

The witch is no longer on the outside, but her ability to disrupt is harnessed in the creation of this society, she has the potential to transform reality. This imagined world is born out of Jones's feminist thinking and an interest in how law impacts on women in Ireland.



You can eat terribly in Venice, but if you are a little discerning you can eat very well without spending too much.

Wander down Via Giuseppe Garibaldi, near the Arsenale, and you will find lots of buzzing bars perfect for a Campari or Aperol spritz, and towards the Arsenale end of the street there is Hostaria All'Ombra, that has great local cooking; try the cuttle fish with polenta.

Just past here is a tiny coffee bar – right beside the floating fruit and vegetable stall – called Trattoria del Piave and in behind there is a dark narrow room where all the locals eat. Expect brisk service and hearty fare at a very good price.

The Palazzo Fortuny (Campo S Beneto, €12) is always a beautiful place to be, but this year for the Biennale it is magical. The lighting is soft and low and the cloth-covered walls are adorned with an amalgam of beautiful ancient objects and well-chosen contemporary art.

I would generally advise visiting whichever exhibition is on at the Punta della Dogana, a building redesigned by architect Tadao Ando, but this year I would not recommend spending the €18 entrance fee.

Venice can test your patience, but can be the most rewarding place if you veer off the main streets and let the city surprise you. The light playing on the hazy pink buildings and the strange iridescent blue/green of the water make it one of the most beautiful places in the world.

In Venice, the ground always seems to shift below your feet, creating a slightly otherworldly feeling. When you are crossing canals, fluctuating between boats and land all day, it becomes less clear what is stationary and what is flowing.

The main strip, which stretches from San Zaccaria to Piazza San Marco then winds up past the expensive shops on Calle Larga and on up as far as San Stefano, is always difficult to navigate during the day.

It is uncomfortably packed and the places you come across are mainly bad value. If you are willing to get a little confused and lost, wander away from these areas; you will be well rewarded.



Take a boat to Giudecca and look back at the stunning skyline or head for the Cannaregio area. It is very local and has busy restaurants along the canals, you will find Venetian families and little shops selling the local produce down its side streets.

You may be moved to emotion or left completely cold by much of the art you see at the Biennale. It is an overwhelming spectacle and it can be difficult to separate the good from the not so good.

Two exhibitions that I would like to return too were 'Music for the Gift' by James Richards (The Welsh Pavillon, Santa Maria Ausiliatrice Fondamenta San Gioacchino, free entry) and 'Doing Time' by Tehching Hsieh (Taipei Fine Arts Museum of Taiwan, Palazzo delle Prigioni, free entry).

This year, the main exhibition in The Arsenale is curated by Christine Macel who has been working at Centre Pompidou, Paris. I found the show underwhelming.

The sheer size and busyness made it an uncomfortable experience from which to view art, but the show did not engage me as I hoped it would. In the present world of constant questions, this show did not seem to ask any. I wanted to be challenged or shocked or deeply affected in some way, but none of these things happened.

When visiting the Giardini, I would recommend viewing the German, British, USA, and French pavillions. The German pavillion has timed performances. It is worth finding out when these are on.

'Philip Guston and the Poets' (Gallerie dell'Accademia, €12) and right beside it 'The Future Generation Art Prize' (Palazzo Contarini Polignac, free entry, Andy Holden was my highlight) are worth seeking out.

Also every week, during the six months of the exhibition, artists will host an 'Open Table' and meet visitors over a casual lunch to hold a lively conversation about their practice.

These bi-weekly events will be organized in two dedicated spaces refurbished for this purpose in front of the Central Pavilion of the Giardini and in the Arsenale.



If you are over on Dorsoduro it is worth visiting The Peggy Guggenheim Museum, if only to marvel at the beautiful terrazzo floors. Not far away, the Osteria Al Squero, on Fondamente Nani is good value.

Or right beside Zattere Vaperetto stop, Pizzeria Da Gianni has a wonderful golden interior, tasty pasta dishes and helpful staff.

We lazed here for an evening dining on lobster linguine, bowls of clams, and we finished our meal with a delicious Sgroppino, prosecco, limoncello and gelato whisked together.

Osteria de Codroma, also in Dorsoduro, is good value and has a typically Venetian menu. A day strolling through this area, dropping into the tiny canal side bars, can be far more rewarding than anywhere near San Marco.

Up near the train station is a bakery called Pasticceria Tonolo which has glass-cases brimming with tempting desserts. It is a good place for a stand up coffee and sweet pastry.

As with most of Europe, it costs a fraction of the price to stand at a bar and have a coffee and snack than it does sitting down. You tend to get better service and a smile from the locals.

Vaporetto tickets are expensive, so it is worth thinking about how much you will use them and structure your day around that. Buying a ticket individually costs €7.50 a journey and can be onerous, as machines are often broken and, even so, there is little forgiveness if you are caught without a ticket.

A bunch of 10 tickets is often the best choice. You can walk to most places on San Marco and Dorsoduro and at times get to places far quicker on foot.



I have been visiting Venice regularly for 14 years and the numbers of people on the Vaporettos has increased on each visit, making them less comfortable each time.

My favourite spot is to go downstairs and out the back, there are four seats here and room for a few to stand.

Campo San Stefano is a great square for late night drinks and the Trattoria de Fiore just off the top of the square on Via Pietro Antonio Coppola is ideal for a tasty nibble; try the marinated aubergine.

For a fancy cocktail – be prepared, it will not be cheap, but the surrounds are like none you will encounter anywhere else – try the rooftop bar in The Bauer, the inside bar in Hotel Gritti, or the bar in the Danieli.

Do not let the idea of cocktails fool you; I would not advise wearing high heels.

Wear your most comfortable shoes and keep the heels in a bag. There are no taxis to flag down in Venice, you will be getting home on foot and most lightly will end up taking a more circuitous route than intended, so the best thing to do is to enjoy getting lost.