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The author paddles by Piazza San Marco, at the confluence of the Grand and Giudecca canals.

Taking Venice by Kayak

The best way to see Italy's legendary city is from **YOUR OWN PRIVATE TOUR BOAT**. Step one: Pack your kayak. Step two: Get lost in the canals. *By Mark Anders*

The 50-foot-long vaporetto, brimming with tourists, let out two shrill horn blasts as it plowed closer. All around me Venice's storied waters were roiling with activity: water taxis, police boats, produce barges...even a landscaper's boat carrying shrubs and potted trees. To my right the famous bell tower on Piazza San Marco soared overhead, flanked by the 12th-century Doge's Palace. But as the vaporetto barged forward, all eyes, craned necks, and video cameras pointed toward me — and my red inflatable kayak.

I scanned the canal for a quick escape route, and with two brisk strokes barely slipped out of the path of the lumbering vessel. I could hear tourists chuckling as the wake splashed over me and adrenaline coursed through my veins. Rush hour in Venice.

When I began planning my Venetian

kayak expedition, everyone told me the canals would be busy, but paddling here was like playing a real-life version of the video game Frogger. It was so crazy that I wasn't even sure it was legal. It turns out kayaking is allowed, and it's hands down the coolest way to experience the city.

Venice attracts 13 million visitors

annually and gets so crowded during the summer that the area around the Rialto Bridge, Piazza San Marco, and the Accademia gallery has been called the "Bermuda Shorts Triangle." By escaping to the water I was free to explore the urban wilderness of *La Serenissima* and her labyrinth of more than 200 canals.

Having had enough of the hectic

afternoon traffic on the Grand Canal, I paddled around Punta della Dogana to the Reale Società Canottieri Bucintoro, an ancient rowing club established in 1882, where I was to meet my friend and paddling mate, Taylor Marshall. I was using the club as a base during my four-day trip and quickly fell in with the "Maestro," the Bucintoro's 73-year-old boat builder, Laggia "Mirto" Remo. Though he spoke no English and I no Italian, it was enough that we shared an affinity for paddling.

Mirto and his affable 35-year-old apprentice, Sebastiano Faggian, invited me to the kitchen above the boathouse, where we sat overlooking the Giudecca Canal. The Maestro and I tried to bridge the language gap but resorted to drinking red wine and grappa while he thumbed through stacks of faded, dog-eared photos, giving me a hodgepodge pictorial history of his life working on the water in Venice. "Mirto says he remembers when the canals were calmer, before the motos came," Sebastiano translated.

I spread a map of the city on Mirto's small wooden table, and the men highlighted special canals to visit and over-touristed areas to avoid. "They come exactly the same way every day," Sebastiano said with a chuckle. "I know where the tourists go."

By the time Taylor showed up at the club, I was amped to explore the insider's Venice. We inflated the other kayak I had brought from the States, gingerly slipped from Mirto's dock into the fray, and turned into a side alley canal. Then everything went quiet.

The water was eerily placid and pale green, like a milky emerald. I expected the canals to stink, but they were surprisingly clean. And although the summer sun blazed above, five-story buildings rose on either side, creating a man-made canyon that blocked the sunlight and cast a cool dampness at water level.

Here in the smaller canals, things were easy. We limboed under low



DO IT YOURSELF

KAYAKS You can't rent kayaks in Venice, so bring your own inflatable or folding craft (\$399 for Advanced Elements' 10-foot, 5-inch AdvancedFrame kayak; advancedelements.com).

INSIDER'S TIP Società Canottieri Bucintoro offers two-hour paddling courses on authentic

Venetian rowboats through the Grand Canal and parts of the lagoon (about \$180, including tip; bucintoro.org).

HOTELS The 19-room Casa Nova, a new addition to the luxurious Bauer Hotel, has a convenient side alley leading to a service dock on the Grand

Canal (from \$399; bauercasanova.com).

FOOD & DRINK Feast on tapas-like *cicheti* — small dishes such as fried risotto balls and rice-stuffed tomatoes — at the city's affordable and fun wine bars. Best bets: Osteria da Carla and Cantina Do Mori.



The stairs off of Piazza San Marco make landings easy for all kinds of craft.

bridges and slipped through canals too narrow even for the sleek gondolas. We skirted beautiful 500-year-old homes, once painted bright yellows, pastel greens, and sea blues but now faded, with moss and barnacles creeping up the walls. The rich sound of classical piano wafted down upon us as we floated past a tired brick building. "Bravo! Bravo!" an old Venetian lady called to us from above as she shook out a maroon carpet from her window.

Though we had a map, it stayed stowed in Taylor's kayak. No need. We were destined to be lost, because the canals have a logic all of their own. We'd paddle around aimlessly for hours, letting our curiosity lead us, until a landmark or familiar restaurant would give us a clue to our location. Thankfully, though, it's virtually impossible to get dangerously lost.



The author kicks back with Mirto (left) and his apprentice (center).

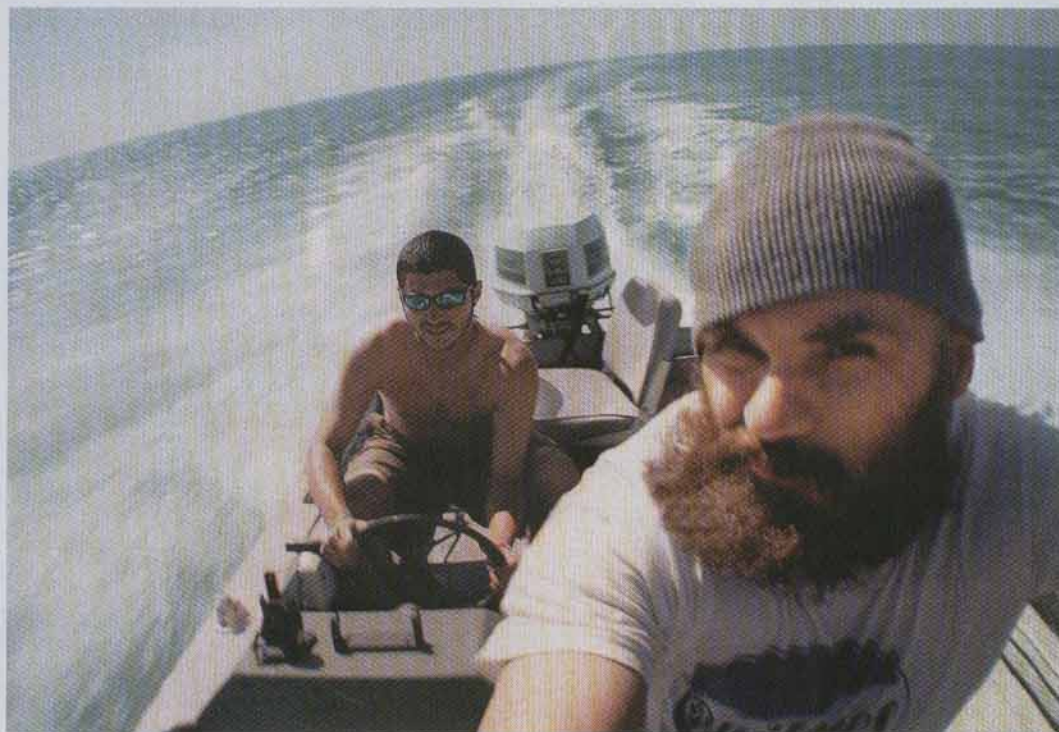
The Grand Canal, shaped like a backward S, cuts the city in half and always led us back to our base camp at the opulent Bauer Hotel, where we attracted stares as we parked our kayaks on the marble dock.

One evening, after polishing off a liter of red wine and a tasty margherita pizza in the hip Dorsoduro district, we returned to the Bauer to get headlamps and glowsticks for a night paddle. Venice is strangely quiet at night; even the Grand Canal empties out, save the occasional vaporetto or tourist-toting gondola. Without the flood of boats we were free to relax, to float lazily along and absorb the beauty of the architecture.

We were stealth. Without trying we'd sneak up on tourists dining alfresco and couples kissing in the shadows along the canals. And because we moved as silently as the gondolas, the gondoliers were always surprised to see us. Some were interested in our strange kayaks; the lion's share eyed us with disdain.

The next day, back on the dock of the Bucintoro, we hung out with Tino Conte, a gondolier turned souvenir shopkeeper. As we recounted our night's paddle and the scornful looks, Tino just laughed.

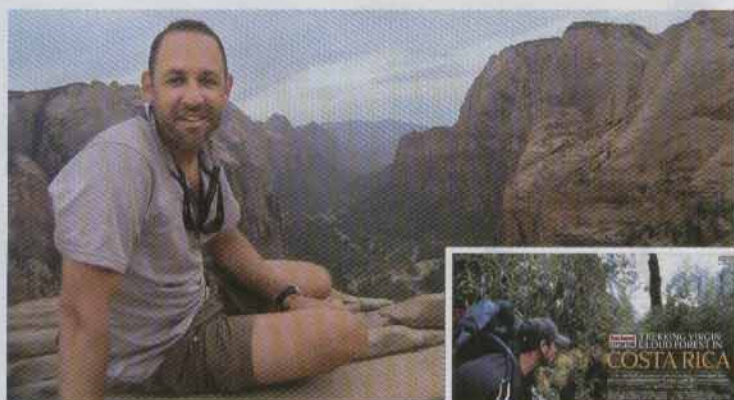
"The gondoliers spend their entire lives going in a circle, following the same path for the tourists," he said. "You've gone places in their own city they will never go. They are just jealous of you and your boats." ❊



THE ROAD WARRIOR

"Deep South" (page 70)

"A road trip is like being thrown in a raft with someone," says California-based photographer **CRAIG CAMERON OLSEN** (right), who accompanied MJ contributing editor Guy Martin on a 1,700-mile odyssey through the Deep South for this month's featured road trip. "You get to know your traveling partner real well, but you have no idea what's going to happen." Olsen, who grew up hunting and fishing in the Black Hills of South Dakota, met a host of oddball characters on his trip, but the most memorable was a monstrous one-eyed gator. "We got the most photos of him because he couldn't see us coming."



DEEP IN THE TROPICS

"Trekking Virgin Cloud Forest in Costa Rica" (page 60)

When he caught wind of an untouched national park in Costa Rica, **MICHAEL BEHAR** was skeptical. "I thought the country was touristy and overdeveloped," says Behar, who has explored western New Guinea and hitchhiked across Africa. But when he was trekking on an unmarked trail in a deserted forest aiming for a 11,644-foot peak, he was glad he had a GPS. "Our topo map was from 1944," he says.



URBAN PADDLER

"Taking Venice by Kayak" (page 38)

Frequent MJ contributor **MARK ANDERS** was uniquely qualified to paddle a kayak through Venice's storied canals, having piloted gondolas outside San Diego and worked as a kayak guide on Tennessee's Ocoee River for five years. Anders found that navigating Venice by day was harrowing, but once the sun went down, his kayak was the key to the city. "We would pull over, get a bottle of wine and plastic cups, and paddle around, drinking all night," he says.

EMBEDDED WITH ECO-ACTIVISTS

"Forests Under Fire" (page 46)

Journalist **DAVID SHAFTEL** started to get nervous when he heard reports of cougar and bear sightings near an anti-logging activists' camp in Oregon's Siskiyou National Forest, where he was researching July's Environmental Affairs report. "You feel silly with a bag full of beef jerky in a vegan camp," says the New York City-born Shaftef. "Who do you think is gonna get eaten first?" The activists, who were protesting salvage logging following the 2002 Biscuit fire, were more worried about a timber camp guard they had temporarily blockaded in a trailer. But the guard was the calmest person around: "The activists thought he was some drunk redneck who'd start shooting them up," says Shaftef. "He just wanted to know if there were any girls in camp."

HAWAIIAN CHILL

"Lifesavers" (page 88)

New York-based fashion photographer **PAMELA HANSON** first encountered Hawaii's amphibious side two years ago while on assignment in Oahu. "Surf culture fascinates me," says Hanson, an avid swimmer and tennis player. "It's even more amazing when you try to surf and realize how hard it is." Hanson returned to Hawaii to shoot the islands' elite lifeguards for this month's Style section, and was inspired by the athletes' serenity. "There was a certain peacefulness about them," says Hanson, whose second book, *Boys*, from Assouline Publishing, hit stores in May. "It made me want to dust off my boards."



OLSEN, COURTESY OF CRAIG CAMERON OLSEN; HANSON, MARY ALICE STEPHENSON; BEHAR, ANDREW HOZMARREN; ANDERS, COREY RICH