

WHERE TO STAY

Venice Berkshire + Jeremy Renner

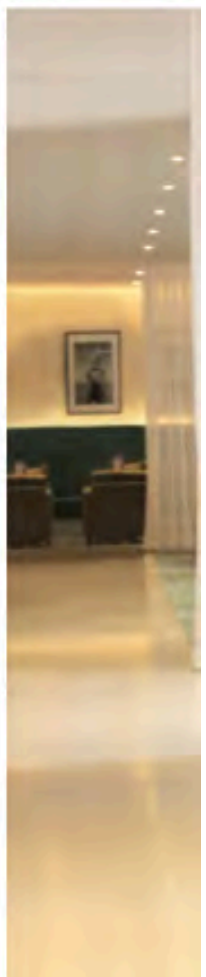
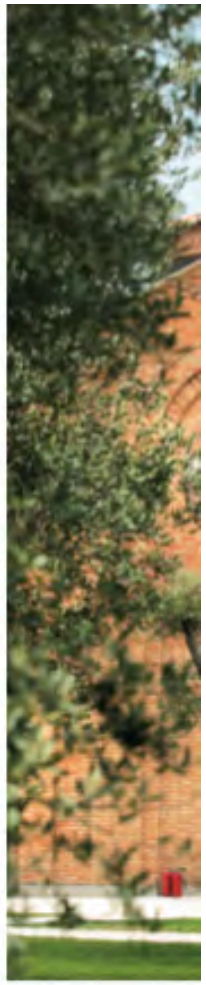
EDITED BY PETER BROWNE

EXCLUSIVE FIRST REVIEW

ST MARK'S? GET SET, GO

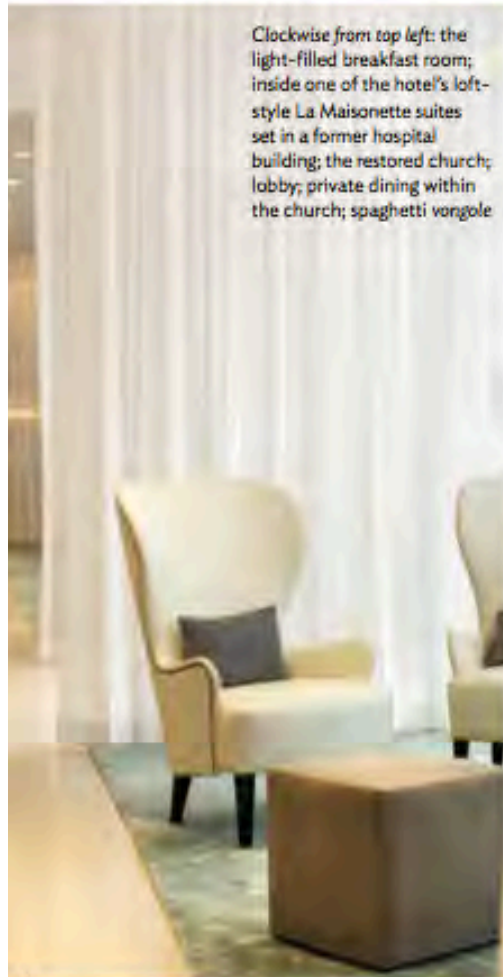
Don't wrinkle your nose at the big business name: the fresh-faced JW Marriott in Venice is shaking up the way we experience this much adored but overcrowded city. By Michelle Jana Chan. Photographs by Lydia Evans

WHERE TO STAY





Clockwise from top left: the light-filled breakfast room; inside one of the hotel's loft-style La Maisonette suites set in a former hospital building; the restored church; lobby; private dining within the church; spaghetti vongole



A GULL SOARS OVERHEAD; the curve of its wings spans the blue sky. There is a repertoire of seabird calls and the faint whiff of salt in the air. This is Venice too. I am lying on a sunbed by a rooftop infinity-edge pool. Down below, mahogany *moscafi*, the city's glamorous water-taxis, glide past fishing boats, a flotilla of sailboats, kayaks. Beyond, in the misty distance, are the towers and domes of the city and in the other direction, the Adriatic.

Out here in the Venetian Lagoon it is impossible to forget the *spozalizio*, the city's marriage to the sea. For more than a thousand years, merchants and mariners made their fortunes on Venice's trade relations with the rest of the world. Their fortunes, in turn, made it an astounding city. It is remarkable that anywhere else could ever wow Marco Polo, who was born here.

Much should be made of the geography, the largest wetland in the Mediterranean basin. The tiny archipelago that is historic Venice is held within the embrace of an unstirring inland sea protected by the natural defences of long, narrow island barriers. You couldn't dream up a more perfect design for a maritime power.

Deservedly, the lagoon islands – from northern Torcello to Chioggia in the south – are experiencing something of a renaissance. Amid the poetry – the pretty fishing village of Burano and artisan communities of Murano – there are islands that have passed through strange, often unspoken histories. One became a weapons store, which exploded and destroyed the island's former convent. Another was a prison and a quarantine station for returning seafarers. Many contained the ill within high, rather ominous brick walls: one for lepers, one for patients with infectious diseases; another was a lunatic asylum for women.

One of the larger islands, Isola delle Rose, is made from sand and soil dug out during the construction of the city's commercial port. Upon it they built a hospital for those with pulmonary disorders so patients could leave the congestion and humidity of Venice for this leafy, oxygen-rich sanctuary enhanced by onshore sea breezes.

After the hospital was shut down in the 1970s, Isola delle Rose lay abandoned for decades. That is, until now. Its latest incarnation is as a JW Marriott hotel, the group's top-tier brand which includes Grosvenor House in London. The hospital-to-hotel conversion is by Milan-based Matteo Thun & Partners, who had to contend with some crude institutional architecture, including the fact that most rooms faced the sea rather than the Venetian

skyline. Yet in spite of such inconveniences the Italian design practice has nailed the transformation. Spaces are lustrous and bright with unfiltered Mediterranean light; the interiors are refreshingly contemporary for Venice, which is still obsessed with velvet, gilt and brocade. Up on the fourth floor is the ravishing rooftop bar and pool (one of very few in the city, which makes this hotel doubly special), where I stay as long as I can get away with.

Among 16 hectares of landscaped grounds, the hospital's former warehouses, workshops and woodsheds have been transformed into big rooms with private pools, gardens and terraces: clever box-in-a-box architecture with stand-alone buildings housed inside the original red-brick walls. The design is clean but not minimalist: gorgeous parquet floors and luxuriant furnishings abound, including rather too many cushions (where to put them all when you fall into bed?). The most coveted rooms overlook the lagoon (I'll take number 506, please!) or the 1,000-year-old olive groves or the soaring neo-Romanesque Catholic church.

This is less urban bolthole, more holiday hotel with all the trimmings (three pools, a kids' club, watersports, volleyball on the lawns). There are four restaurants, including one by Giancarlo Perbellini, who has notched up two Michelin stars in Verona (and once taught me to make tiramisu in Vietnam; he gets around), as well as a slick cooking academy fronted by Micki Milan, who may sound like a porn star but is in fact the perfect culinary host, whether haggling over sun-dried Sicilian tomatoes in the Rialto or ripping out fish intestines in the hotel kitchen. The supersized spa – probably bigger than some hotels in Venice – makes use of the revered, high-performance QMS products.

But these are the frills. This property is all about the location, the space, the light, the air. It's about a new way to see Venice. The 20 minutes by *moscafi* to St Mark's Square is no shuttle transfer but a voyage of discovery – as the captain carves a way between tidal shallows, salt marshes and bricole poles – to the architectural masterpiece that is Venice. The magic is that you can also retreat to the place that was originally built to help people breathe. In a way, it is doing the same today. Finally, La Serenissima is living up to its name.

JW MARRIOTT VENICE RESORT & SPA, ISOLA DELLE ROSE, LAGUNA DI SAN MARCO, VENICE (WWW.JWMARRIOTTVENICE.COM). DOUBLES FROM ABOUT £290