



Chapter 1

VENICE, ITALY



A Bus on the Water

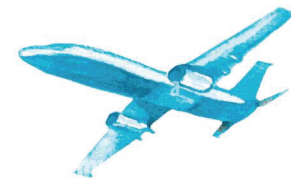
“Benvenuti a Venezia,” Welcome to Venice, read the sign in the airport terminal. Lauren stood, looking at the posters and maps as she waited for her parents to finish gathering the luggage at Marco Polo International Airport. She loved the thrill and excitement of traveling, and she loved maps!

Her little sister Katie bounced up beside her and held her pink stuffed cat, Meowsers, up to Lauren’s face. “Ciao!” Katie said in her best cat voice, waving Meowsers’ paw. “Arrivederci!” Lauren said as she smirked at her sister’s constant companion.

Ten-year-old Lauren and seven-year-old Katie had been learning about Venice, Italy, for the past several months as they prepared for their family trip. After an extremely long flight from Washington, DC near their home on the East Coast of the United States, across the Atlantic Ocean, over most of Europe and the Mediterranean Sea, they were finally arriving!

Lauren turned her attention to a map of Venice nearby. With her finger, she traced the distinctive backwards-S shape of the Grand Canal as she thought about the history of this unique city. She had learned that—1600 years ago, after the fall of Rome—the Veneti people had retreated to the islands in this lagoon off the Adriatic Sea to seek safety from the Germanic and Hun invaders who were terrorizing them. Eventually, their small settlements had grown to a city sprawling across 124 separate islands separated by 178 canals and linked by over 400 bridges. When they outgrew the islands, they continued building right out over the water on platforms built on wooden poles sunk deep into the lagoon. The city had truly earned one of its most famous nicknames—The Floating City.

Even now, Lauren and her family were still several miles from the actual city of Venice. The airport rested on the solid mainland, and they would need to take a bus to their final destination.



Mom and Dad joined Lauren and Katie.

“All set?” Mom asked.

It had been an agonizing wait to get through customs, where officials asked Mom and Dad seemingly endless questions. Finally, everyone’s passports were stamped. Lauren and Katie felt so grown up having their very own identification!

Now, the girls weaved through the crowd, walking quickly to keep up with their parents. Getting separated from her parents in a strange place was Lauren's biggest fear. They all pulled their wheeled luggage behind them. Meowsers rode proudly, sticking out from the top of Katie's backpack. They were happy to arrive at the covered pedestrian walkway with moving carpets. Katie hopped on, "My legs are tired!"

"You'll be able to rest on the Vaporetto soon," said Dad.

"What's a Vaporetto?" asked Lauren.

"Venice's public buses," replied Dad. "Here we are."

Lauren expected to find a bus station like those outside the Metro in Washington, DC. Instead, she emerged to the blinding sun reflecting off the water and a pier of boats lined up as far as she could see. Dad led the way to a ticket counter.

As they waited in line, Lauren looked at the board listing arrival times. She was excited to recognize some of the places. Murano—That was the island where all of the hand-blown glass was made. San Marco—She knew that was the sestiere or district where they would be staying. Rialto—That was the most famous bridge in Venice over the Grand Canal. Prices for tickets were listed with the € symbol for euro, which looked like a funny comb or a side-ways horseshoe to Lauren, instead of a dollar sign.

"€30," said the man behind the counter with a heavy accent.

"We're just in time to catch the next bus," said Dad, grabbing the tickets. "Let's hurry!"



"Where is the bus?" asked Katie, as they followed Dad along the pier.

"This is it!" Dad stopped in front of a low wide boat, sort of like a ferry boat but only big enough for people.

"We get to take a boat?!" said Katie jumping around.

"Yes, the buses in Venice are boats," said Mom, smiling and pushing Meowsers deeper into her backpack to keep him from falling out.

Dad helped load their luggage on board while Mom guided them to seats inside the covered section of the boat.

Now things were really getting exciting! The Vaporetto pushed off from the pier and set out for open water. The islands had looked very close together from up in the plane, but from here, the closest one looked very far away. Lauren watched the nearest island draw nearer and nearer. After about 30 minutes, the island was quite close. She expected the boat to dock soon, but they seemed to be passing by it.

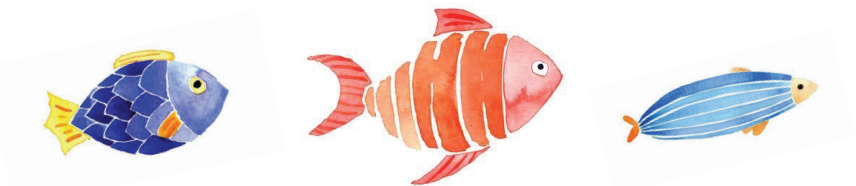
Mom seemed to read her mind. "This is the island of Murano," she said. "It is one of Venice's outlying islands, not in the city itself."



"That's where they make the glass," said Katie proudly.

"That's right," replied Mom. "Venice is up ahead."

Lauren turned her attention to the water rising and falling in the sunshine. She knew that, while the water in some of the smaller canals was quite shallow, 5 to 15 feet, it was much deeper here, perhaps 30 or 40 feet. A white egret whizzed by with something in its beak. She thought about all the sea creatures living down there: fish, crabs, squid, mussels, and clams. She liked seafood, but she had never tried squid before. That was the challenge she had set for herself on this trip: try squid. Maybe it was the long trip, or maybe it was the motion of the boat, but she felt her stomach turn at the thought and decided to think about something else for right now.



Looking up ahead, she could see the City of Venice growing large before them. It looked like nothing she had ever seen before. The tall buildings seemed to be floating right on top of the water! "No wonder they call it The Floating City," she thought, rising in her seat to try to see what the buildings were standing on.

"Madonna dell'Orto," a pleasant Italian voice announced.

"This is our stop," said Dad, gathering the luggage.

Mice in a Maze

After disembarking the Vaporetto, Lauren pulled out the map of Venice she had brought from home. Her love of maps meant that she was pretty good at using them to find her way. Mom helped her locate where the boat had dropped them off and their destination, the Hotel Rialto.

Lauren traced a route on the map with her finger. "It looks like this is the quickest way," noting all the twists and turns of the alleyways. "It looks like a maze."

"A mouse maze!" Katie remarked, peaking over the edge of the map. With the high walls of buildings around them and the narrow alleyways, it did, indeed, feel as if they were in a mouse maze.

"Well, we better get going, mice!" Dad set off, following the map on his phone and pulling his luggage behind.

Venice looked exactly like the pictures Lauren had seen in their homeschool studies, except being here almost didn't seem real! Brick, plaster, and stone buildings rose straight up four or five stories. Windows with round arches, pointed arches, or covered in canvas awnings peeked out from behind flower boxes overflowing with red geraniums. The narrow cobblestone sidewalk was bordered by the buildings on one side and a straight drop to a canal on the other. Lauren tried to peer over into the water without getting too close to the edge as she hurried along after her family.



On the opposite side of the canal, there was no sidewalk. The water went straight up to the side of the building. They passed a home, and Lauren did a double-take. Their front door exited directly into the water! Did they just step out and swim?! The very next building revealed a boat tied up at a pole outside the door. One could step directly from the boat into the house and back.

Around the next corner, there were no longer houses on the other side of the canal. Instead, it just looked like a long and very old brick wall. Lauren could see the tops of trees on the other side and wondered what kind of garden or park must be inside and how to get there.

The wall itself was stained with several layers of colors, shades of white and reddish-brown. These were the acqua alta, or high water, marks. Lauren marveled at how high the water would get when it flooded, which happened up to 100 times a year in Venice. She could see that the water would sometimes cover almost the whole first floor of the buildings!



They passed a cafe where small tables with crisp tablecloths lined the canal under emerald green umbrellas.

"I'm hungry!" Katie said, starting to lag behind.

This made Lauren uncomfortable because she was walking behind Katie and didn't like to be so far back from Mom and Dad.

"Keep going, Katie. We'll be there soon!" She encouraged. "The map says only two more turns."

"Come on, my mice," called Mom from ahead. "We'll get you some cheese after we get to our room." Katie hurried forward.

Their narrow alley suddenly opened into an intersection with a much wider walkway and canal. Stone steps led up to a bridge over the intersection, and several boats made their way lazily back and forth under the bridge.

"Is this the Grand Canal?!" asked Katie excitedly.

"No, I don't think we're there yet," said Mom, looking questioningly at Dad.

Dad paused, looking at the map on his phone. "This way." He turned to the left, took a few steps, then stopped. "Wait. Or . . . this way." He turned around, walked a few paces in the opposite direction, then stopped again.

Mom looked at Lauren and smiled, shrugging her shoulders. Lauren looked down at her map again, tracing the route from where the water bus dropped them off to the Hotel Rialto.

"Dad, I think we need to cross the bridge," Lauren suggested.

Dad looked for a long moment at his phone, slowly turning in a circle. "You're right, sweetheart!" he finally agreed. "Maybe we should let you lead," he chuckled.

Lauren bolted ahead. At least, now, everyone else would have to keep up with her. She mounted the steps and crossed the canal. On the other side, their path was even narrower than the first. A bit further, they left the canals altogether and passed through very narrow alleys with buildings on both sides. Sometimes, they had to pass between buildings through tunnels that were so low Dad had to duck his head. Lauren remembered a fact she had read in a book about Venice. It supposedly had the narrowest street in the world at only 21 inches! She had found that hard to believe before, but now, being here, she believed it.

All at once, they emerged on a wide street with more modern-looking buildings on both sides. Tall shop windows were beautifully decorated with displays of food, jewelry, and clothes.

"We must be getting close now!" Mom said cheerfully.



The "Grandest" Canal

"We're on the Strada Nova," Lauren announced. "The Grand Canal should be on the other side of these buildings!" Strada Nova means "New Street" and is one of Venice's many pedestrian streets (no cars). These pedestrian walkways are called Calle. The Strada Nova was a wide, main artery filled with restaurants and stores on both sides. Lauren also knew from the map that it ran alongside the Grand Canal.

They were clearly getting close to the city center where it was much busier. Cafes and shops spilled out onto the sidewalk, and the crowd grew thicker. Lauren constantly checked behind her to see if the others were close; they always were. Sometimes the street would open into a small square with several paths leading out of it, and it took a minute to find out which one was the right one. They soon left the Strada Nova for smaller streets again, but even these were modern and bustling.

Katie recognized a word that she knew painted in gold letters on a shop window, "Pasticceria," or sweet shop.

"Ooh! Meowsers wants a cannoli!" She stopped mid-stride, causing Mom and Dad to bump into each other.

"Let's get to our room, and then we can figure out food. Okay, honey? We're almost there. Right, Lauren?" Even Mom was starting to sound flustered and tired now.

"Right!" said Lauren, trying to sound confident as she turned the map around and looked for the nearest street sign. She moved forward, determined to find the way.

"But Meowsers needs a cannoli," she could hear behind her.



There were more stairs, bridges, and narrow tunnels through buildings ahead. Lauren was beginning to get confused about where to go next. She felt like she had made a wrong turn and then, suddenly, a dead-end—not into a building, but into the water. A canal, bigger than any they had seen so far, opened in front of them. Lauren stopped in her tracks.

She looked at the map, and her heart sank. She had wanted to be the one to guide everyone to the hotel. Now, she had to admit defeat. She turned to hand the map to her dad. As she did, her eye caught something just down the canal that looked very familiar—a bridge.

She had seen that distinctive bridge many times. It was featured in every book of Venice they had read. Two straight ramps rise over a single arch to meet in the middle at a portico. Covered shops line the sides of the ramps all the way up.

Lauren pointed, "The Rialto Bridge! We're here. This is the Grand Canal!" From there, they could see their hotel a short distance away. A quick retracing of their steps led them to the right path, and before they knew it, they had arrived at the Hotel Rialto.

"Look!" said Katie, pointing. "Isn't that the same boat that dropped us off?" They all looked in time to see a Vaporetto letting passengers off just in front of the hotel.

"Looks like we could have just stayed on the water bus and gotten a ride all the way here," Mom exchanged glances with Dad.

"You live and learn," shrugged Dad as they wheeled the luggage through the hotel doors. Lauren felt relieved and exhausted but equally excited that their adventure in Venice had finally begun!

